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ABSTRACT

The stress felt by older students in higher education should be addressed by educators and members of the helping professions. The word stress is related to "distress" and perhaps best describes what substantial numbers of adult learners experience when returning to school. For instance, researchers have found graduate students to be particularly vulnerable to emotional maladies such as loneliness, severe anxiety, role confusion, and alienation. The following may be the causes or explanations of stress among older students: (1) biological reasons, such as less stamina, less resistance to fatigue, and serious health problems; (2) time-limited, speed-related performance tasks such as classroom tests; (3) having to memorize and recall specific factual data; (4) the threat to self-esteem represented by possible failure; and (5) the group dynamics within a classroom of younger students. Recent research by J. James seems to bear out Malcolm Knowles' contention that instructor behavior is probably the most important single variable in creating or avoiding stress in adult learning situations. Humor is an effective mediator of mild stress. A program at the University of Maryland helped provide graduate students with effective skills for dealing with stress. Jacobson's progressive relaxation method may be helpful, as may be the instructor's treatment of adult learners as intellectual equals and fellow "seekers of knowledge." (The document contains a 25-item bibliography.) (CML)

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Stress and Stress Management in Contemporary Adult Education: A Commentary

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Stress and Stress Management in Contemporary Adult Education: A Commentary

The concept of stress has been defined and redefined by various authors but has apparently not been of measurable interest to investigators and practitioners presently in the field of adult education. While a rather extensive literature on stress in children of school age exists, such is not the case for literature concerning graduate students and adult learners beyond high-school and four-year college age levels.

A widely used Social Readjustment Rating Scale, for example, developed by Holmes and Rahe (1967) to measure the "stress value" of significant life events, offers an exhaustive list of 43 potential "stressors"--none of which specifically refer to educational successes or failures; neither do the words "stress" or "anxiety" appear in either the text or the index of Patricia Cross's otherwise highly comprehensive volume on "Adults as Learners" (1988), now in its 9th printing.

According to current statistics, increasing numbers of mature adults and "non-traditional" students in search of additional educational goals are presently flocking by the millions toward learning centers and classrooms of higher education in this country (Peterson, 1986; Swift, 1986). Their particular circumstances, value systems and potential problems

can therefore no longer be regarded as matters of small concern, best treated by "benign neglect." As potential "stress factors," they need to be specifically considered by educators on all levels and perhaps addressed by members of other helping professions as well.

Stress: What does it mean?

Hans Selye (1956), the "father of stress research," defined stress generically--if somewhat vaguely--as "a state, manifested by a specific syndrome which consists of all the non-specifically induced changes within a biologic system." This situation, according to Selye, results in a General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), comprised of three stages: (1) Alarm Reaction; (2) Stage of Resistance; and (3) Exhaustion.

Following Selye's initial contributions and extensive writings on the subject, a review of the literature some 25 years later by Dobson (1983, pp. 1-2) revealed the existence of "over 300 definitions of stress and words which are semantically related to it."

More recent investigators have moved beyond the relatively mechanistic psychosomatic model of stress and its psychophysiologic repercussions (Dunbar, 1947; Grinker and Robbins, 1954) by focusing on psychological and behavioral aspects created by the interaction between external and internal stressors on one hand--and the individual's reaction to such stressors on the other.

Examples of this approach are the "Interactional Model" of stress, developed by Lazarus (1976), and Woolfolk and Richardson's (1979) "Cognitive-Appraisal Model." Both models regard stress as the product of a person's cognitive appraisal of situations and events which may have the potential of becoming stressors when perceived as threats to the psycho-social well-being of the particular individual involved. Accordingly, different stressors will mean different things to different people.

In its lexical meaning, the word "stress" is related to "distress" (or "strain") and perhaps describes best what substantial numbers of adult learners experience when "returning to school." The following remarks will attempt to address some of their problems.

Stress and Attrition: A Perilous Combination

That all is not well among graduate students who may be subject to higher stress levels than commonly assumed is dramatically illustrated by statements and data provided by Mallinckrodt, Leong, et al. (1985). These authors found that "though graduate students are not generally regarded as individuals who are particularly vulnerable to emotional disorders, there is convincing evidence to the contrary. Loneliness, severe anxiety, role confusion, and alienation are common maladies among graduate students" (Katz & Hartnett, cited by Mallinckrodt, Leong, et al., 1985). These manifest emotional difficulties, one may add, could well be considered

as either the results or as the sources of more or less severe stress syndromes in operation.

The same authors also tell us that "In various studies conducted over the past 20 years, attrition rates as high as 50% have been found in doctoral level programs . . . Students who fail to complete doctoral programs because of their own lack of effective coping mechanisms or the lack of supportive environments are a well-hidden but nonetheless major cost in our society" (p. 471).

While obviously not all adult learners and graduate students are currently striving for doctoral degrees, one wonders, however, to what extent such or even higher attrition rates may also proportionately apply to other adult educational programs, for reasons in need of further exploration.

Since such attrition rates are neither a particular credit to respective student populations nor to their educational parent institutions, pertinent statistical data will more likely than not continue in their tendency to remain "well-hidden" from the public eye, unless actively pursued by inquiring investigative minds.

Age Groups of Adult Learners

For purposes of this commentary, I shall consider selected stress factors in adult learners mostly within the context of higher education, as encountered in age groups between approximately 25 and 55+ years of age.

This approach excludes, to some extent, "novice adults" and regular, undergraduate students of college age who will commonly be facing physiologic and life-stage-related, generic stressors of a different kind than will older, more "established" adults.

It does include, to some extent, the group of "regular" graduate students, ranging from ages 25 to 35, but also, as a major concern, those non-traditional students grouped as "middle-aged" (35 to 55) and usually "returning to school" after previous interruptions for family, work-related, or other personal reasons. Last, but not least, the demographically ever-increasing numbers of "young olds," ages 55 and older, should not be forgotten.

Specific Stress Factors in Older Adults

While stress syndromes and their possible repercussions in regular graduate students can be considered as typical for vulnerable, still relatively younger adults, middle-aged and older learners may have to face additional, specific, age- and life-cycle related problems of their own. Some of these will be briefly touched upon in the following paragraphs.

Biological Aspects

On the biological level, well-known physiologic variables of maturation and advancing age may play a significant role in adult learners. Minor age-related impairments of vision and hearing can, of course, be easily corrected and should not be major sources of stress. More serious health problems,

however, occasionally present serious challenges and impediments to older learners' ability to persevere. But even without these, middle-aged people are likely to have less stamina and a lesser resistance to fatigue than younger learners--some exceptions notwithstanding.

Performance Tasks and Classroom Tests

A major source of potential stress in adult learners are time-limited, speed-related performance tasks and--especially--classroom-bound, written examinations, mandated by the curriculum and applied on the time-honored but questionable premise (still shared by some educational psychologists) that "speed equals quality of performance." Here, their inevitably slower reaction times and need for more temporal leeway "to do a careful job" may become painfully apparent to some, if not most, adult learners past the ages of, say, 45 to 50.

By the same (or similar) token, memorizing and subsequent, unprompted recall of specific factual data, publications and their authors (with dates of publication), and similar materials--often justifiably regarded as irrelevant or non-essential by some adult learners--can become more difficult and tiresome with increasing age. This notion applies especially when older learners are required to recall such items from memory in closed-book, no-notes, essay-type classroom examinations under time pressure, only remotely related to what happens "in real life," under similar circumstances.

Self-Esteem

The element of self-esteem is often prominently at stake in more mature, adult learners whose days of formal schooling and previous educational experiences are frequently quite remote as compared to those of younger learners. Finding themselves confronted with a competitive, demanding academic situation, necessary adjustments may place a considerable strain on the individuals' intellectual capacities and mental resources. Shortcomings, real or imagined, and the threat of possible failure, are then likely to become anxiety- and stress-producing elements, leading to rumination states, self-doubt, and diminished self-esteem.

Group Dynamic in the Classroom

"Thrown together" and competing with younger classmates, and not seldom facing an instructor half their age, older students' classroom existence may sometimes balance on a precarious edge.

If timid, insecure, or afraid of speaking up in front of the class for fear of "making fools of themselves," they may be ignored; or, worse, overtly or covertly "patronized" and discounted as impotent "oldsters," not worthy of respect or participant attention.

At the other end of the spectrum, stronger personalities with well-developed independent views and modes of critical thinking, based on their accumulated life experience and previously acquired professional skills and expertise, may not

be able to resist the temptation to "dominate" the classroom and to speak up all too freely, thereby creating situations potentially embarrassing to themselves, their classmates, and their instructors.

There will, of course, also be a large middle-ground of those trying to conform and to play the game wisely according to its rules and as graciously as they can manage--with nevertheless a keen awareness of what seems to be pertinent or not for their respective learning goals and objectives. Their notions in this regard may or may not always coincide with the offered syllabus and its requirements, thereby forcing some sort of "double-think" on their parts.

Lastly, there may conceivably also be a small segment of nontraditional students getting frustrated enough to either drop out entirely, or to aggressively maneuver themselves into outsider categories. Gloomily accepted (at best) by faculty and classmates alike, they stay on as mildly disruptive or tedious irritants within otherwise regular classroom routines.

Stress Factors: Internal and External

On the basis of what has been mentioned, conflicts and potential stress factors can thus be regarded as both internal and external: On one hand, well-motivated adult learners are usually acutely aware of concrete, for-credit course requirements which must be fulfilled to receive a passing grade; on the other hand, such mature learners may also have to reconcile scholastic, academic, and concurrent inter-personal

and situational demands with their own internal sets of thoughts, value systems, emotions, and pre-conceived frames of reference that may concur with, or diverge from, the offered educational program to a greater or lesser extent.

Institutional Policies, Faculty Attitudes, and Andragogical Principles

Despite the mentioned demographically significant changes in student populations taking place today, educational systems and settings of higher education--laudable exceptions and special programs notwithstanding--still seem to be slow in making esential adjustments necessary to accomodate the needs and special interests of their middle-aged and older learners. More or less rigidly enforced compliance with traditional course work requirements, conformity, and convergence are still "the rule for all" in many, if not most, such educational settings.

This last-mentioned approach is easily and naturally enough accepted by less critical, teenaged or young adults, eager to learn from their elders and focused toward graduation "no matter what." More mature learners, often with "hidden agendas" of their own, tend to look at their educational situations in a different light. They should therefore be treated in accordance with acceptable principles of andragogy, an adult-educational concept originally introduced to the United States by Eduard Lindemann in 1927, and recently "rediscovered," revitalized and updated with a set of specific

recommendations and theoretical considerations by Malcolm Knowles (1980).

Without going into details, it may be briefly mentioned here that andragogy, as advocated by Knowles and in contrast to traditional pedagogical principles, encompasses teaching methods and specific considerations geared toward recognized needs of adult learners and their circumstances in adult and other settings of higher education. In their present form and pragmatic context, however (for pertinent details, see Spear, 1986), Knowles' newly found ideas, as meritorious and wide-reaching as they may turn out to be, still seem in need of further elaboration and, especially, dissemination among practicing members of the teaching professions--often operating under considerable stress conditions themselves (Greenberg, 1984; Humphrey & Humphrey, 1986; Kyriacou, 1980; Andrews, 1977; Hargreaves, 1978; and others).

As a pivotal element in Knowles' conceptual frame of reference, faculty attitudes and approaches have been recognized as highly decisive determinants in creating either helpful or counter-productive conditions in adult education classrooms (Knowles, 1980).

To illustrate the point, Jim James (1985) examined in a refreshingly frank research paper the question of potentially stress-inducing "faculty-generated load," as viewed by a representative sample of adult learners.

Based on a conceptual model developed by Howard McClusky (cited by James, 1985), he subjected 54 adult learners to "semi-structured" interviews, in an attempt to determine "the ratio between the burdens that an adult bears and the strength that he/she has to bear them," and to identify "specific instructor characteristics that decrease adult-learner Margin to the point that a learning endeavor becomes less than optimum for the learner" (p. 3).

The data were evaluated by four seasoned, impartial faculty experts in accordance with specific criteria established at the beginning of the study.

Subsequent statistical analysis revealed the striking result that the combined, instructor-linked behavior characteristics (ranging from teaching methods, reading and homework assignments to personal attitudes and mannerisms) accounted for 88.54 percent of the perceived instructor-generated load. Environmental and task-related categories, on the other hand, played only a minor part as perceived by these adult learners (2.54 and 8.92 percent, respectively.)

James's study (which he regards as a preliminary foundation for further research) appears to be one of the very few formal projects done in this area and supports Knowles' pervasive and persistent contention that, in terms of andragogy, instructor behavior, along with "self-directedness" (or the lack of it) in adult learners, is probably the most important single variable in creating (or avoiding) excessive

stress in adult-learning situations.

(Some of Knowles's notions have not remained unchallenged. His claim, for instance, that "adults fear traditional grades, feeling childlike, disrespected, and dependent when receiving them" was "overwhelmingly vetoed" by a majority of 100 adult subjects who participated in a systematic study conducted by Virginia Lantz Denton (1986).)

"Stress Management": Some General Remarks

As a guiding principle and general notion concerning adult education, the impartial observer may as well realize that no matter how emotionally and intellectually mature adult learners may appear in other walks of life, educational situations and settings seem to have an inevitable tendency to induce or reactivate certain degrees of regressive behavior and attitudes in some, if not most, adult participants. Therefore, the situation requires a certain amount of sensitivity, understanding and tact on the part of the instructor.

Certain allowances will have to be made, at least initially, until an atmosphere of rapport and mutual trust has been established; and depending on how constructively (or not) potential conflict areas are being addressed and mediated by all parties involved, their inherent elements will either serve as positive stimuli and motivating factors--or, to the contrary, as sources of frustration, resistance, and counter-productive psychological tension states.

This notion does not mean that the adult learner could or even should be "protected" from any and all forms of educational stress at any cost. As one author (Dobson, 1983), puts it, ". . .performance is improved by anxiety until an optimum level of arousal is attained. After this, anxiety becomes greater and performance decreases" (pp 14-15). In other words, "healthy stress," akin to "healthy anxiety," can be a motivating, or even necessary ingredient in successful learning experiences (as well as other worthwhile pursuits), and should therefore be allowed to do its useful part.

Experience in group dynamics has shown that calm acceptance of anxieties expressed, and, "an atmosphere. . .in which people can safely talk about the tensions, dissatisfactions, and difficulties they are experiencing" (Miles, 1981, p. 46) will go a long way in defusing and resolving stress-related situations and concerns.

Accordingly, in most "ordinary" circumstances, no special handling or "remedial" measures other than those commonly incorporated in sound educational and andragogical principles and normal interpersonal relations are usually needed to handle this type of "physiologic" stress in older (as well as younger) adults. A certain degree of seasoned, professional competence, empathy, and emotional maturity on the part of teaching personnel is, however, a necessary, or perhaps indispensable, prerequisite.

Humor

Surprisingly enough, the subject and use of humor as an effective mediator of milder forms of stress and capable of defusing and resolving affectively charged situations before they have a chance to get out of hand, is hardly ever mentioned in scholarly texts and the educational literature. Yet, as most seasoned educators have doubtlessly long realized, this sometimes overlooked "variable," applied in the right dosage, can be of considerable (or shall I say immense?) value to both faculty and adult (as well as younger) learners alike.

It is the ability to employ humor as stress moderator that can make the difference between a tense, affectively charged classroom climate (not especially conducive to effective learning), and one that is more easygoing and relaxed--the latter point being even more important as far as mature adults, finding themselves in a somewhat uncomfortable situation, are concerned.

One of the first to give scholarly attention to the subject of humor in psychoanalytic terms was Sigmund Freud (1959), who, in a brief but comprehensive treatise first published in 1928, regarded humor as "the highest of defense mechanisms" and a "liberating element," indicating "the triumph not only of the ego, but also of the pleasure principle, which is strong enough to assert itself. . .in the face of the adverse real circumstances" (p. 217).

More recently, the subject has also been treated in fuller detail by Lefcourt and Martin (1986), in their book appropriately entitled, "Humor and Life Stress--Antidote to Adversity," which may be of some interest to practitioners in the field of adult education, for their own sake and that of their adult audiences.

Special Stress Management Programs on Campus

Mallinckrodt, Leong, and Fretz (1985), mentioned earlier, have apparently realized, that an ounce of prevention can go a long way in forestalling possibly severe stress syndromes in graduate students that could destroy their entire educational careers, and, in fact, sometimes do.

To avoid such dire consequences, the authors describe a comprehensive stress management program instituted at the University of Maryland to remedy some of the stress-related difficulties encountered by graduate students at that institution. At the time their account was published, the program had been in apparently successful operation for two years.

As far as can be determined from the authors' description, the program is flexible enough to efficiently serve its purpose and could conceivably be seen as a model operation and paradigm for other institututions and university campuses to emulate.

The program's goal is broadly defined as "to teach graduate students more effective skills for dealing with stress in both their academic and personal lives" (p. 471). Its

design was originally based on an initial series of interviews to elicit and determine the causes of stress most often experienced by graduate students, and an extensive review of the pertinent literature.

Remedial measures range from one-time, instructional sessions, emphasizing specific skills, and mostly offered on weekends, to weekly, ongoing, small-group formats of 6-10 sessions each, with emphasis on mutual support via the group process. The authors report that, "Evaluations from participants have been quite favorable" and that their program is now regularly offered and conducted by the university's counseling center.

On a more modest scale, Patel, Marmor and Terry, and Patel and North (cited by Henry and McCallum, 1986) reported good results on campus in the treatment and prevention of stress-related hypertension by using Jacobson's progressive relaxation method, in combination with biofeedback techniques--which, in my opinion, are a good thing to learn for anyone even remotely exposed to stress-related situations and wishing to add a few years to his or her lifespan. This "borderline area" should also draw attention to the fact that in cases of truly severe, debilitating stress syndromes with tangible repercussions in psychosomatic and other areas, professional assistance and medical treatment should be sought and rendered promptly as in any other walks of life.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, I may perhaps be permitted to offer a few private remarks regarding my personal philosophy, developed in many years of teaching graduate students and professional trainees of various ages, ranging from their late twenties into their sixties.

In my attempts to create a congenial, stress-reduced atmosphere and optimal learning conditions for these adult learners, I have always found it useful to treat such adults strictly as intellectual equals and fellow "seekers of knowledge," rather than as more or less passive recipients of pre-digested ("canned") knowledge and subject material that could provide for a convenient syllabus on pragmatic, academic grounds but would otherwise, if rigidly enforced, tend to stifle natural curiosity--with little or no room for novel, independent thinking, productive discussion, and true intellectual growth.

This approach, in my opinion, also implies that a definite, indispensable element of autonomous self-directedness must be part and parcel of any and all adult-oriented learning programs--with faculty, essentially and ideally, to serve as role models, knowledgeable resource persons, competent, enthusiastic mediators, and cogent catalysts of their adult audiences' learning efforts.

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Author's Notes

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